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An animal embalming complex at Saqqara

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Abstract:

This paper is a new examination of the original find context of the Saqqara lion tables (CG 1321–2) in ‘Gallery C’, an underground structure in the Step Pyramid complex. The substructure may date to the 1st millennium BCE, and this structure was likely part of an embalming complex for the Apis or other sacred animals. The adjacent Western Galleries were probably re-used during this period as an animal necropolis.

This paper aims to shed new light on later ritual activity at the site of Saqqara by re-examining archaeological material and architectural evidence from a comparatively unscrutinised underground complex. In the late 1800s, Mariette’s workmen uncovered an unusual rock-cut substructure located in the north court of the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara.¹ The substructure contains nine side chambers to the west of the central north-south gallery, and four entry staircases to the east of the central gallery, as shown in fig. 1. The substructure was labelled ‘C’ on a map of the complex drawn by Lauer (fig. 2), and will be referred to here as ‘Gallery C’.

Numerous artefacts were found at the end of the northmost side chamber in Gallery C.² This chamber was labelled ‘A’ by Mariette, and lies directly opposite an entry staircase, as shown in fig. 1. The objects discovered in the chamber consisted of two lion-headed travertine³ embalming tables or beds, now classified as CG 1321–2 in the Cairo Museum (see figs. 3 and 4), one block of limestone, bones found resting on the limestone block, two travertine⁴ ‘paving stones’, and pottery vessels containing ‘black earth’.⁵ Fig. 5 reconstructs the in situ positions of the artefacts, based on Mariette’s description.

In the early twentieth century, Borchardt⁶ suggested that the lion-headed tables were placed in Gallery C following the destruction of a 2nd Dynasty royal monument that was razed to make way for the Step Pyramid complex in the 3rd Dynasty. Present day scholars tend to follow this interpretation and date the lion tables, and by extension Gallery C, to the 3rd millennium BCE Early Dynastic period.⁷ However, evidence suggests that both Gallery C and the lion-headed tables were created approximately two thousand years later, in the 1st millennium BCE.

1 Mariette (1889), pp. 83–86.

2 Mariette (1889), p. 85.

3 Identification based on Aston *et al.* (2003), pp. 21–22, 59–60. Previous sources refer to the tables using the terms ‘alabaster’ or ‘calcite’. However, in accordance with Aston *et al.* (2003), pp. 21–2, 59–60, the stone of the tables is referred to here as ‘travertine’.

4 Aston *et al.* (2003), pp. 21–22, 59–60.

5 Mariette (1889), pp. 85–86.

6 Firth and Quibell (1935), p. 77.

7 El-Shahawy, Atiya (2005), pp. 62–63; Reader (2017), p. 81.

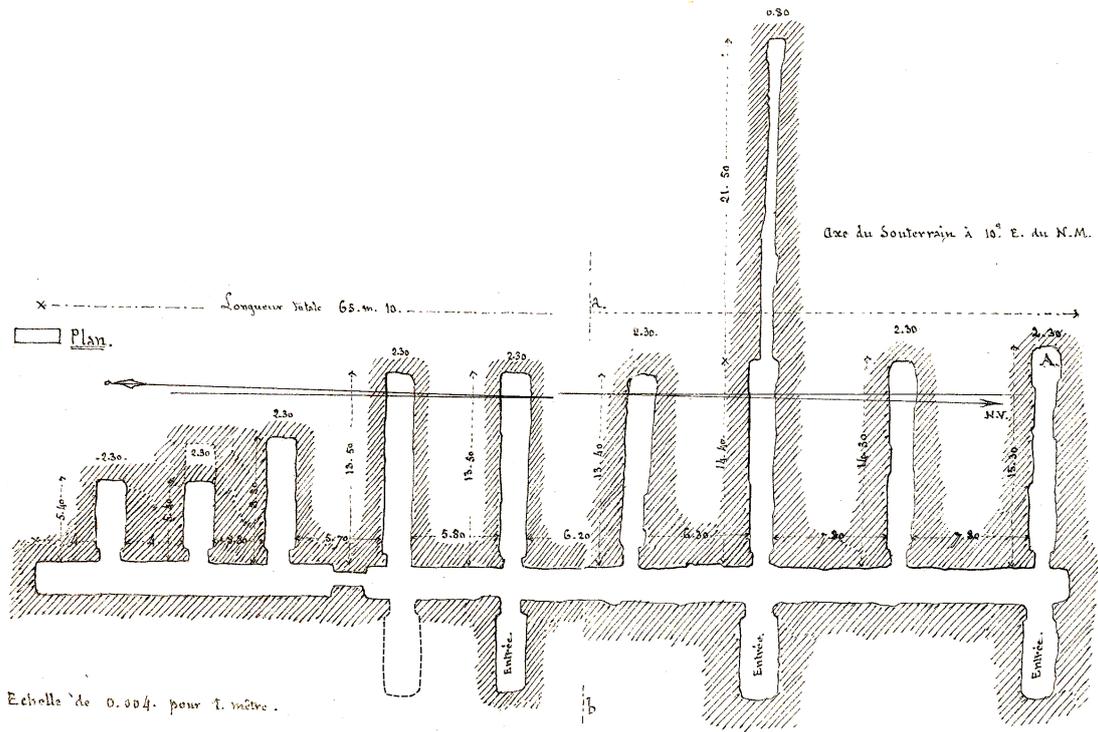


Fig. 1. Plan of Gallery C. Entryway drawn with dotted line indicates location of entry staircase not depicted on Mariette’s original plan. Rightmost chamber ‘A’ was the apparent find location of the two lion tables and other artefacts discussed in this article. North is to the right.
(modified from Mariette (1889), pp. 84-85).

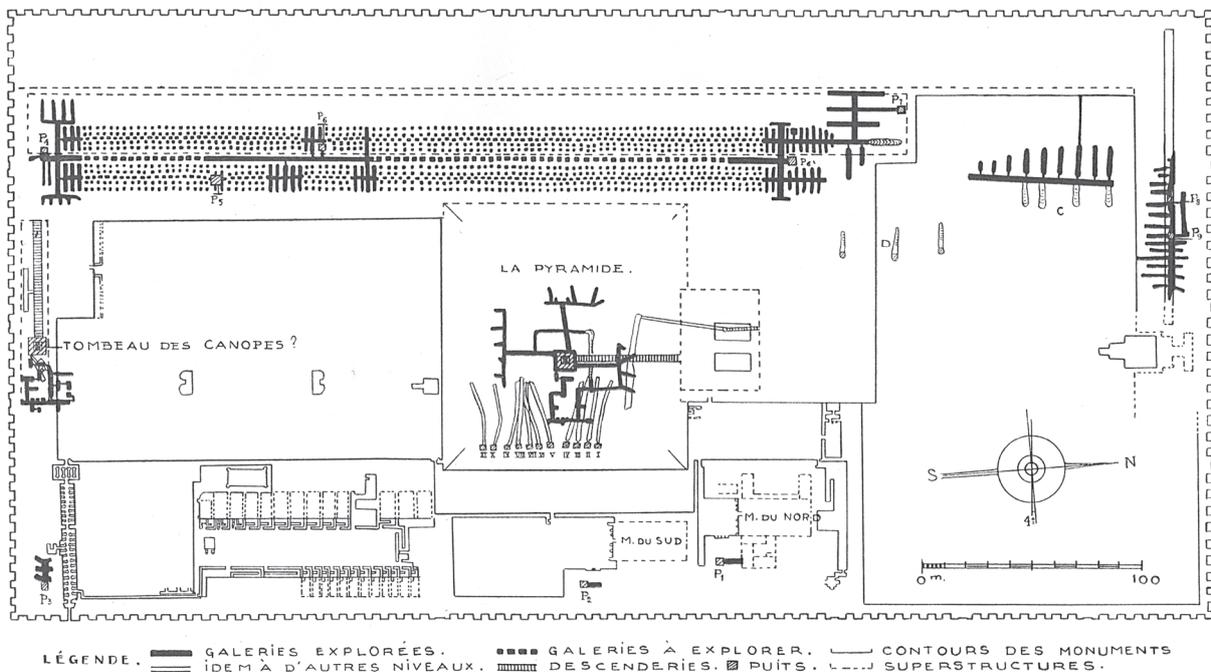


Fig. 2. Map of Step Pyramid complex. Gallery C is located in the top right of the diagram. The long Western Galleries are located to the left of Gallery C (from Lauer (1939), pl. XXII).

Lauer remarks that the four entry stairways of Gallery C did not exhibit portcullis emplacements, a common feature of entry stairways for tombs of the 2nd and 3rd Dynasties. He also notes that the orientation of Gallery C does not match the general orientation of Djoser's 3rd Dynasty structures in the complex.⁸ Consequently, Gallery C likely dates to a later period than the Step Pyramid complex in which it is located. Finally, Lauer notes the uncommon presence of four parallel entry stairways in Gallery C.⁹ Such a feature does not appear to be attested in any other Egyptian substructure of mortuary or ritual nature.¹⁰

Examining comparanda for the Saqqara lion tables provides further evidence that Gallery C postdates the Djoser complex. The earliest well-dated example of a lion table is the 18th Dynasty travertine table from the royal tomb of Horemheb (KV57).¹¹ However, evidence from Memphis indicates the Saqqara tables were created much later. Three lion-headed embalming tables made of travertine¹² and similar in shape to those found at Saqqara¹³ were uncovered in a built structure likely employed to embalm Apis bulls at Memphis. This precinct was in use from the 25th Dynasty to the Roman period.¹⁴ In 1982, excavators of the Memphite precinct noted the travertine tables from nearby Saqqara as comparanda for the Memphis artefacts.¹⁵

Other finds at the Memphite embalming complex also parallel those made by Mariette's team at Saqqara. Two travertine 'paving stones' found lying adjacent to one another in Gallery C are comparable to the two travertine paving stones deposited in a similar fashion at the Memphite embalming precinct.¹⁶

A jar uncovered in the Memphite embalming precinct was found to contain embalming residue.¹⁷ Vessels from a more recently excavated embalming deposit in Luxor were described as containing 'bitumen residue and a brown-black substance'.¹⁸ Consequently, the pottery vessels said to contain 'black earth'¹⁹ from Saqqara Gallery C may also have been embalming residue jars.

'Table 1', a limestone embalming bed from the Memphite precinct,²⁰ was found with a packet of ox bones lying on it.²¹ The limestone block from Gallery C also had bones lying on its surface (see fig. 5) and can thus be identified as an embalming bed. Mariette stated the skeletal remains found in Gallery C were human. However, he refers to his find as 'a few bones', and makes no reference to pelvic bones or a human cranium.²² Consequently, Mariette's evaluation of the remains is doubtful, and the bones found placed on the limestone embalming bed could also have been those of an ox or another large animal.

Given the similarity of the material found in Saqqara Gallery C and the Memphite embalming precinct of the Apis, a reinterpretation of the function of Gallery C is now possible. The material found in Saqqara Gallery C is likely an embalming deposit, possibly related to the Apis bull or other sacred animals, and dated to a much later period than the original 3rd Dynasty precinct of Djoser.

8 Lauer (1939), p. 39.

9 Lauer (1939), p. 39.

10 Dodson and Ikram (2008).

11 Davis *et al.* (1912), pl. LXXVIII.

12 See Footnote 3.

13 Jones and Jones (1982), p. 54 (n. 8).

14 Jones (1990), pp. 142, 144, 147.

15 Jones and Jones (1982), p. 54 (n. 8).

16 El Amir (1948), p. 52.

17 El Amir (1948), pp. 52, 56.

18 Bietak and Reiser-Haslauer (1982), p. 186.

19 Mariette (1889), p. 86.

20 Jones and Jones (1982), pl. XIV.B.

21 El Amir (1948), p. 52, pl. XVI.5.

22 Mariette (1889), p. 85.



Fig. 3. The first Saqqara table, now CG 1321 in Cairo (from Borchardt (1937), pl. 3).



Fig. 4. The second Saqqara table, now CG 1322 in Cairo (from Borchardt (1937), pl. 3).

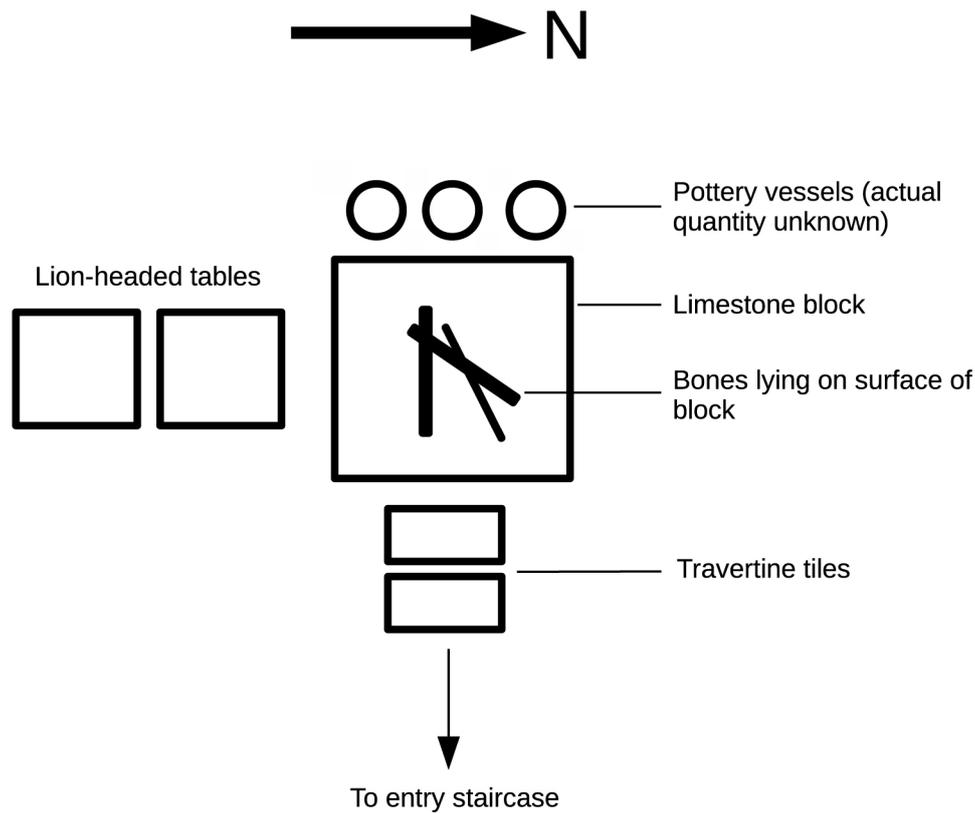


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of in situ positions of the artefacts as found in Gallery C, Saqqara, interpreted from Mariette's description (drawing by T. Beuthe).

Bones found in both Gallery C and Memphis may be remnants of the embalming process, since intact Apis burials were not found to contain articulated mummies, but only packages of bones.²³

At only 7 meters deep, the corridor and chambers of Gallery C are relatively shallow excavations.²⁴ The special layout of Gallery C was apparently designed for relative ease of accessibility, and embalming material was present in at least one of its corridors. Consequently, Gallery C likely represents an example of an underground component of a Saqqara embalming complex, whose superstructure remains unexcavated. The existence of such a superstructure can be surmised from a recently uncovered 26th Dynasty embalming complex at Saqqara. This complex consists of a superstructure and a shaft leading to an underground embalmers' installation.²⁵

The general resemblance of many artefacts found in Gallery C to objects from the Memphite embalming precinct provides an indication that the Saqqara complex may have been in use prior to the establishment of the Memphite embalming complex in the 25th Dynasty. Three out of the four staircase entrances to Gallery C were found to be backfilled with rocks and sand when first uncovered by Mariette's team.²⁶ Consequently, the gallery entrances may have been deliberately backfilled after the embalming complex was abandoned.²⁷ A similar backfill of rocks and sand was

²³ Dodson (1999), pp. 63–64.

²⁴ Lauer (1939), p. 38.

²⁵ Hussein (2017).

²⁶ Mariette (1889), p. 83.

²⁷ The southernmost staircase was apparently not found until later excavations conducted by Firth. Its condition at the time of discovery was not described (Firth (1928), p. 82).

also found in the 26th Dynasty embalmer's shaft near the Unas pyramid,²⁸ providing evidence that such 'decommissioning' practices may have been common for embalmers' complexes in the 1st millennium BCE.

Thus, Saqqara Gallery C and the area above it may have constituted a 1st millennium BCE complex where the Apis bull was embalmed, prior to the establishment of the Memphite Apis embalming precinct circa the 25th Dynasty. Alternatively, there is also evidence to suggest the putative Saqqara superstructure and Gallery C substructure could have served to embalm other sacred creatures.

Gallery C and the structure overlying it would have been situated in convenient proximity to the Western Galleries, possibly enabling efficient transport of mummified animals to the Western Galleries for burial (see fig. 2). Evidence for long-term use and reuse of the Western Galleries can be inferred from documentary sources. The general appearance of the subterranean galleries, shown in fig. 6, seems to correspond to the layout of the recently excavated 2nd Dynasty royal grave of Ninetjer as well as the 2nd Dynasty complex of Hotepsekhemwy at Saqqara.²⁹ It has been suggested that the Western Galleries originally served as the burial complex of another 2nd Dynasty sovereign.³⁰ Evidence for the 2nd Dynasty date of the galleries may also be provided by the stone vessel fragments found in the south end of the galleries.³¹ These vessels were said to be of inferior quality by Firth and Quibell,³² but unfinished blanks and even raw material used in the fabrication of stone vessels were also found in the underground galleries of Ninetjer,³³ indicating that the presence of such objects may be normal in 2nd Dynasty royal burials at Saqqara. The vessels found in the south end of the Western Galleries were made of a variety of hard stones and 'alabaster' (likely travertine).³⁴ This description of the stone vessels found in the Western Galleries also corresponds approximately to the description of stone types used for vessels found in the Ninetjer galleries.³⁵

In addition to the original sloped stairway entrance to the Western Galleries, several vertical shaft entrances are also attested for the complex (see the squares marked P₅ and P₆ in fig. 2 and those labelled 7, P', P₄ and P in fig. 6). Similar entries in the tomb of Ninetjer were created when the complex was reused in later periods.³⁶ Thus, the shaft entrances to the Western Galleries were likely also created to access the tunnels during this period of later use. Quibell and Firth briefly discussed the presence of stone vessels dumped in passages 'to the north' of these intrusive entrances, presumably by the individuals who created the intrusive shafts.³⁷ Again, this parallels the evidence from the tomb of Ninetjer, where stone vessels placed in the burial during the 2nd Dynasty were re-deposited in the central corridor of the tomb during a later period.³⁸

Human and animal remains found in the Western Galleries also provide evidence for potential reuse of the complex in later period(s). A few human bones were uncovered in an unspecified sector of the Western Galleries.³⁹ These could be remains either of the original 2nd Dynasty royal burial, or of a later intrusive burial. The north end of the Western Galleries, located closer to what may be the original entrance staircase, labelled E by Lauer (see fig. 6), contained the bones of

28 Hussein (2017).

29 Lacher-Raschdorff (2014).

30 Stadelmann (1991), p. 49; Dodson (2003), pp. 41–42.

31 Lauer (1936), p. 181.

32 Firth and Quibell (1935), pp. 17, 71.

33 Lacher-Raschdorff (2014), pp. 91–92.

34 Firth and Quibell (1935), p. 71.

35 Lacher-Raschdorff (2014), pp. 91–92.

36 Lacher-Raschdorff (2011), pp. 545, 547.

37 Firth and Quibell (1935), p. 17.

38 Lacher-Raschdorff (2011), p. 542.

39 Lauer (1936), p. 181, n. 1.

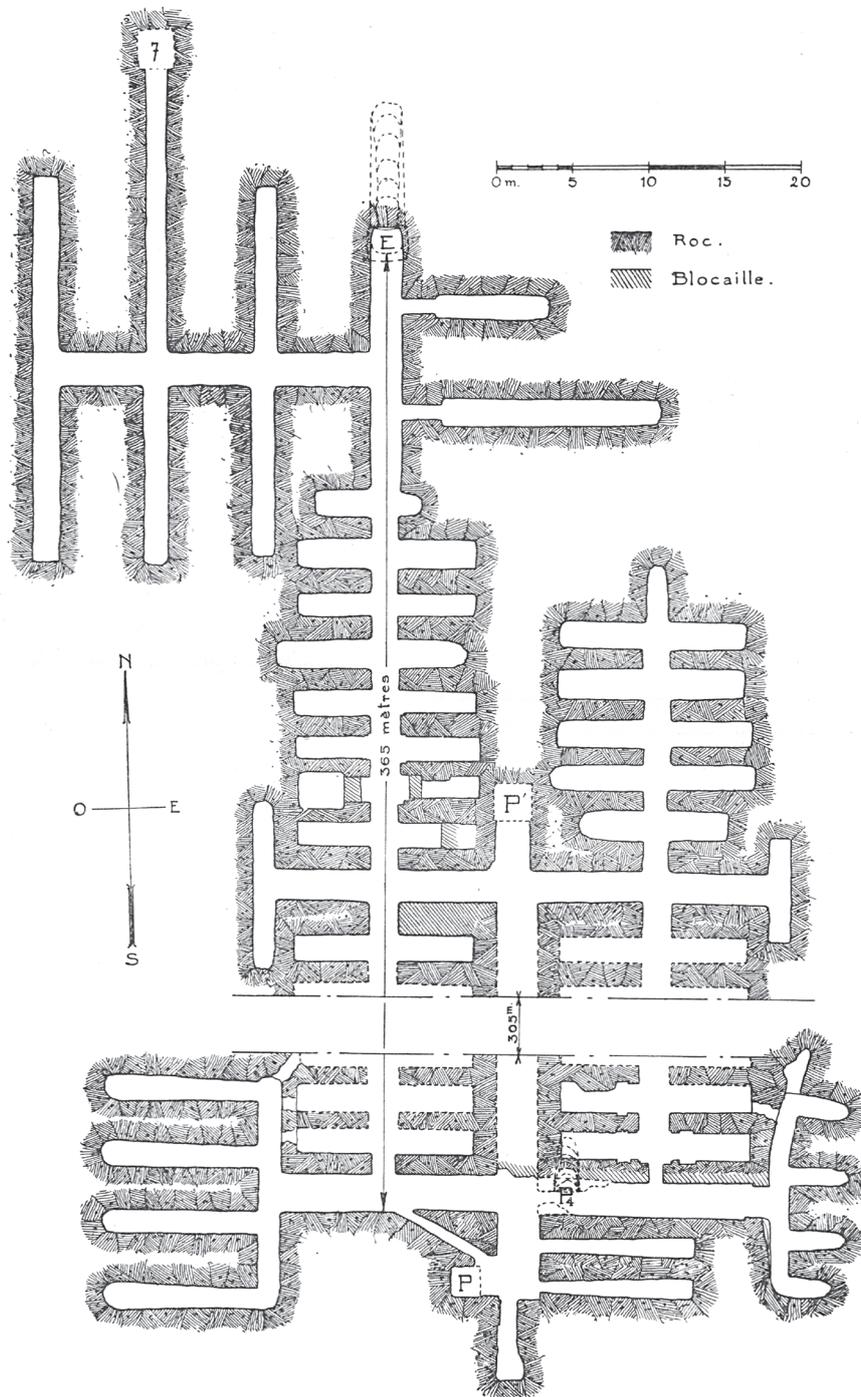


Fig. 6. Map of the explored sections of the Western Galleries in the Step Pyramid complex (from Lauer (1936), fig. 206).

numerous animals, including oxen, calves, donkeys, pigs, dogs, and crocodiles.⁴⁰ With the exception of the donkey remains, mummified remains or animal bundles with bones from the same species of animals mentioned by Lauer were also found ritually deposited in the ibis catacombs of Tuna el Gebel.⁴¹ Consequently, the animal remains found near entrance E of the Western Galleries may originally have been placed in an animal catacomb that reused the Galleries as a burial space.⁴² Thus, a genuine multi-use animal necropolis may have existed in the Western Galleries, and the destroyed embalmer's complex overlying Gallery C may have served this complex for an undetermined period of time.

From the evidence currently available, Gallery C in the Step Pyramid complex can now be considered an unusual example of an underground structure that formed part of an embalmer's workshop. This substructure was likely part of a complex where the Apis or other sacred animals were embalmed. It is possible to tentatively date this structure to the first half of the 1st millennium BCE. The Western Galleries may also have been re-used as an animal necropolis during this period.

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⁴⁰ Lauer (1936), p. 181, n. 1.

⁴¹ Kessler and Nur el-Din (2005), pp. 152–153.

⁴² Donkey remains were also found in a 3rd Dynasty corridor dug into the moat surrounding the Step Pyramid (Ikram (2017)). Thus the donkey bones in the Western Galleries could also date to the 2nd or 3rd Dynasties and not to the later 1st millennium reuse of these galleries.

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